





A CRY
FROM THE
SASKATCHEWAN

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A CRY FROM THE SASKATCHEWAN

My pale-face brothers, I am no longer young
And hot of blood like the young buffalo
Seeking a foe. The wind, long winters past,
That rocked the cedar and pine that made your cradles,
Cooled my breast and drifted snow-flakes in my hair.

More than a thousand moons I've seen take shape,
Like to fair slender daughters of your race,
That love rounds into perfect symmetry.
Yes! I am old, and soon shall lay me down,
And calmly wait the unseen messengers
Who will clasp my hands and make me young again,
And bear me to wide plains, and forests deep,
That shall for ever bud and blossom untilled.

O brothers, I have ever been your friend,
I have not sat within the Shabandoan
In moody silence, when the barking dogs
Told me some stranger to my race appeared.
Nay! I have arisen, and come with open hands
To meet him, and make him welcome to my fire,
And laid the fairest matting for his rest.
And with these hands that knew not how to serve,

Have I prepared the best that stream or plain
 Could yield, to satisfy his hungered lips.
 Upon these withered hands is there a stain
 Of the bright life-blood of your favoured race?
 Ay, one, and only one. It is a tale
 So short it scarce can weary.

He came to us,

Lost, frozen, starving, and I said, "O Son,
 Whether there be scant or plenty you shall share."
 And all the native skill I had to cure
 The ills and accidents that do befall my people,
 I lavished on him; and he lived with us,
 And all the arts, that you call rude, he learned.
 His hand could set the snare, could carve the pipe,
 Could bend the bark to the swan-breasted craft;
 Could dip its cedar wing in the treacherous waves
 Of giddy rapids, and bring it safely curving
 Up the swift-backing eddy, where he could poise
 His spear a moment, like a fatal shaft
 From the Great Spirit's quiver; then strike and lift
 With one continuous unerring motion,
 From the blood-dabbled wave, the river chieftain.
 All this, and more, these lips and hands of mine
 Taught him, as though he were my flesh and blood.

One child I had, more than the rest I loved,
 Her mother's latest love and pain and joy,
 Made sacred by the life-blood of that mother,
 Splashed on its little face on wild dark night

When my tribe's deadly foe came down on us.
 She grew like the red willow swaying in the wind,
 As lithe, as strong, as supple. Oh! her lips
 Were like the rich frost-darkened berry unplucked;
 Her eyes, such as I've seen when suddenly,
 In the deep winding of a forest trail,
 In early spring I have met a startled doe.
 Wandering alone—I could not wing a shaft—
 The same sweet eyes in wonder, fear and love.

He left us to go eastward to his people,
 And come again when our long, pointed shoes
 Would make swift knifelike slashes on the bosoms
 Of glistening snow-drifts. But, when he was gone,
 I found her moaning near the river bank,
 And gazing in the waters and drawing nigher,
 And looking over into a foaming pool
 Where once I saw whirl for a moment, and crush,
 A bark canoe, and a great chieftain's arms
 Thrown upward, and then pass away for ever.

I caught her arm and looked within her eyes,
 And they were like her mother's, when first she knew
 A son of hers might some day go to battle;
 Except that these swam with cloud-shadowed tears,
 And those with drops that glistened in the sun.

I said no word ; but to her brothers' care
I gave her. Then with quiver full, and tomahawk,
And hunting knife keen-edged, alone I went
More swiftly than a winged arrow, or flight
Of southern-flying crane ; upon his trail.
And he had travelled with a coward heart
That lent swift wings unto his flying feet ;
But mine were borne by hurricanes of hate.
And on the second day, as I pressed through
The last thick willow growth of a great swamp,
There stood he, a score of bow lengths from my hand.
His ear had caught the sound of breaking stems,
And turning full about, his swart face grew
Like a last summer's sapless sun-dried leaf ;
While round the haft of a knife that once was mine,
His fingers made a quick convulsive clasp,
That proved him traitor. I was in no mood
To even the odds of fight that favoured me.
I flashed a long, barbed arrow from the sheath,
And running forward, set it in the string,
And drew it, with the strength of Nana, to the head ;
But all too madly, for like a withered rush,
The bow snapt, and the barb drew back and tore
A furrow in my hand that spurted blood.
He gave a mocking laugh, for now the odds
Were even, and he was young and broad and strong.
I stopped not ; had the arrow sped aright,
I think my blade would have drunk blood as soon.
He made a blow or guard, I know not what,

But I was blown upon him like a pine
 Reft from a mountain, and he fell without a cry.
 I tore the bleeding trophy from his head,
 And turned me back unto my desolate camp.

The sun was going down behind the hills,
 As I strode to my wigwam. Entering there
 I found her sitting, rocking to and fro
 And chanting over a charm of beads and shells.
 She looked up with lips parted like one athirst.
 I knew not what I did, for still I raged,
 And throwing down the tuft of bloody hair
 Nigh to her, then paced me to the door,
 And turning, said, half fiercely: "Minnota! Child!
 A lock of lover's hair I bring you back."

She was my race, my blood in very truth!
 She made no moan, nor cry, nor any sign
 Of her intent; but reaching slowly out,
 Picked up the shrivelling skin and gazed at it
 For one long moment; then, into my eyes;
 Then let slip back, from her shining shoulders
 That were red golden with a shaft of flame
 Shot from the hills, the blanket that was caught
 Across her bosom, and with her left hand laid
 The lock beneath the swelling of her ripening breast,
 And swinging her right arm with a swift flash,
 Pinned it there with a bright blade, and felt back.

Shall I tell you more ? Nay, there is no more.
 The sun of my life went down behind those hills,
 And left me nothing but twilight and dark night.
 Oh ! I was like a mountainside bereft
 Of its fresh verdure by a summer frost.
 I planned a terrible revenge for this,
 That would have swollen a river high with blood ;
 But once, a motherless infant of your race
 Smiled in my face and turned me from my purpose.

And thus, O my white brothers, I have not
 Done one of all your race a single wrong.
 How many of your race have injured mine,
 How many of mine have made a red return,
 I know not, but that wrongs for ever cry.
 But I am old and guided not by passion,
 And I have striven to learn and know your ways.
 I have loved many of you, as I loved my own ;
 And I would my race could at a simple bound,
 Leap the great ocean of change that you have crossed
 After a thousand years of buffetings.

I know of your traditions but an echo,
 Yet if it be the truth, it tells me this :
 That you have come through gradual years of change
 To commune now with strange mysterious powers,
 From the high pinnacle where I see you stand.
 Like a long journey from the Eastern plain
 For ever rising higher to the West,

Until the mountains lift their heads into the sky,
 And see for ever the golden sides of clouds.
 I would that we could stand beside you there;
 But the way is long and weary to our feet;
 And we must rest upon a thousand slopes
 Before we touch the mountains where you stand.

O, my white brother, you have wronged us much—
 Mayhap unwittingly, yet are we wronged.
 Does' not the glancing arrow from a brother's bow
 Bury its fang as deep within the breast,
 As if a vengeful arm had strained the sinew?

But there are those who hate us—I know not why—
 Whose lives seem nothing but a violent hate
 Of all things time and custom have made revered;
 And others, who say they truly pity us,
 But that we idly stand upon the way
 Of a great something that they call progress,
 That like the shrieking, fire-breathing demon,
 That drags your luxury across the earth,
 Mangles the child that wondering stands to gaze.

Far back before my earliest memory,
 Before my father's, came people of your race,
 With twofold object. Some there came to trade
 And give in barter for fur-coated skins.

Clothing and food, and swift death-breathing weapons,
 And deftly fashioned snares, whereby we brought
 Great store of wealth and happiness to them;
 Who gave us value as we counted worth.

And there came others garmented in black,
 Who sought no recompense for what they gave.
 They told us of a new God, and his Son
 Who died that we might live forever anew,
 In some fair after-life.

And those who bought
 Our beaver-skins were also of this faith,
 And we believed them and were satisfied.
 And there came many who joined their lives with ours,
 Who brought from you some learning of your race,
 Who caught from us the love of boundless freedom,
 And these two races side by side, perchance,
 Were walking slowly towards your higher life.

Yet, I can see not that the new belief
 Is better or purer than the one we held.
 We worshipped one great, everlasting Spirit,
 Who, like a chief, ruled lands beyond the grave :
 We strove to quell within the throbbing breast,
 All trembling fear, and fit ourselves to join
 In the heart-lifting dangers that our fathers
 Rejoice to combat in the happy hunting grounds.

We taught a stern creed, giving blood for blood.
 Blood for a broken word : it was the one,
 The only final penalty for all wrong.
 The culprit was not hedged and fenced about
 With laws so nicely intertwined and balanced,
 That each might counteract and dull the effect
 Of the other. Nor any new law made we,
 Tagged like a new line to a rotten one,
 Which latter, breaking at the ravelled flaw,
 Gives freedom to the captive struggling fish :
 Our laws were simple with full, swift effect.

And now I think you weary of and chafe
 Against the doctrines that you taught us first,
 The doctrines of your gentle, peace-loving Christ,
 Who wore upon his brow a crown of thorns.
 And you have made yourselves another Christ,
 This Progress, crowned with iron, and fire and gold ;
 And all who will not turn and follow him,
 Must go down beneath his iron feet, and die.

There came a time when many of your race
 Builded their wigwams along the eastern rim
 Of our great prairie that stretches like a world :
 Built on the fertile bank of a broad stream.
 And there were many there who joined with us
 As others had before. And so we lived in peace.

Then came a day, when we were told that these,
 Our own true brothers bound to us by blood,
 Had risen against you, and broken some new fetter
 That you had made to bind them to one spot,
 But you had ever spoken kind words to us,
 And so we lifted not a hand to strike.
 And you picked up the broken fetter that fell,
 And welded it for those who fled not west.
 But your new Christ followed, and followed, and followed.

And then, at last, you came unto our doors,
 Gorgeous in dress of crimson and blue and gold,
 And held out to us, on sharp points of steel,
 A treaty by which we madly gave to you
 Our fair illimitable hunting ground;
 And got a scant meal, that leaves the belly starved,
 And a small plot where we may make our graves.

I know but little of your past traditions;
 But I have heard, that for a thousand years
 Your people have been skilled in making treaties
 And keeping them—if thereby you profited.
 O my white brothers, glad am I this arm
 Is weak, and that my blood is slow and cold;
 For I have smoked with you the pipe of peace,
 And I have taken your hand within my own,
 And called you my white brother and my friend:

So will I die and violate it not,
 But my eyes are opened, and though very dim,
 See both together, the future and the past.

Why did you come not to us at first and say,
 " My brothers, in our land beyond the waters,
 Our wives and children gasp for the pure air
 In crowded wigwams ; and the chiefs who rule,
 Would bind a starving beggar if he dared
 To fill his cavernous belly with the food
 That his own hand had slain upon the hills."

Why came you not to us, saying openly :
 " Give us some portion of your boundless plains,
 Your forests, lakes and streams ; and we will come
 And build a nation by your side, and teach
 Your children what they care to learn of us ;
 And draw the limit line that shall divide
 Our people from your people, our land from yours—
 Only to mark the ownership—for our hands
 Will stretch across to yours, and our grateful hearts
 Will ever be with you in your wandering camps.
 Would we have turned you from us ? I trow not.
 Have we not given you all, for leave to die.

I know not of myself ; but one of my race
 Who learned the signs and symbols of your tongue,
 Told me that in those great leaves of knowledge

Scattered, each sun, abroad among your people,
 There are many burning and ungrateful words,
 Calling us a useless and a dying race,
 That soon must pass and leave the land to you.

Yes ! my brothers, we are a dying race.
 Dying of the very poison that you brought
 And bartered with us for our native wealth.
 Then turned you homeward to warm luxury,
 Leaving us stretched upon the frozen plain—
 Dying of the diseases, O my brothers !
 That you have brought into our stainless blood.

Hark ! O my brothers, I hear a cry, a shriek,
 And there are crimson stains upon the snow.
 There will be pools of blood in the spring grass.
 See, the half-brothers of my blood once more
 Have broken their fetters, and set the arrow straight,
 And drawn it to the head—I hear it sing—
 Stand back ! or many of your race will weep.

I have no part in this, I am too old ;
 But I have many sons, and their sons sons.
 I know not whether they will cast themselves
 Upon the glittering edge of strife, and die,
 Like their forefathers in the golden past ;
 Or whether they will fold their hands and sicken,
 And drop like rotting branches, one by one.

I see the cloud that blackens in the East,
I hear the murmur of the coming storm
Of blinding hail borne on a pitiless wind.
But, O my brothers, the storm winds of these plains,
Blow not one way alone, but turn and whirl,
Sweeping from you to me, then back again,
And smiting every face with their wild hands.
And this storm shall rage forward and backward,
And jagged lightning strike all sides alike.
Oh ! the Ocean will thirst for the cool, fresh rivers,
For the streams will be salt with the tears of women.